

Part 2: People in glass houses

An interview with Neil Roberts, Senior Curator and Collections Manager, Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

CS News: What is your primary function as senior curator and collections manager?

I've been a curator at the gallery for almost 25 years and was the first permanent curator appointed. Over the last ten years my focus has been mainly the historical collection. I build the collection, exhibition origination, writing publications and

How does the Gallery select works for purchase, what does it look for?

There is a curatorial team of four, including the director. We have an awareness of gaps and look for specific artists when they appear. I look at auctions in the city of older historical work, and monitor all auctions around the country.

Neil has lived in Christchurch all his life apart from five years teaching practical art at secondary school level in the Hawkes Bay. He has a teaching diploma, a diploma in fine art and a BA in art history and history from Canterbury University. He has been on the staff of the McDougall art gallery for almost 25 years and is a joint group author of A Concise History of Art in Canterbury 1850-2000.



JS

I lead a collections team involved in conservation, research and curation.

Please provide a context for the Chch collection.

There are some shortcomings because the collection was neglected from 1932-1969 due to limited funds. We lost much of that period. In 1969 there were 610 works, now there are over five and a half thousand. Brian Muir and others tried to broaden the collection; it did grow in ceramics, photography and fibre arts. Printmaking remained limited. There was painting and sculpture but it was a restricted collection and needed focus. Our collections policy is focused on Canterbury first, national art, then international works, the latter predominantly works on paper. It's not a parochial approach, it's an important focus because no other gallery would collect within this region in depth and we are a regional gallery, so it's our job! Auckland and Te Papa have greater international collections, we have a greater regional collection. That's our strength.

What are your personal art interests?

They are broad. I enjoy aspects of the historic and contemporary collections but I'm a generalist, 'catholic.' Working in a gallery one gets so used to art you can't have the luxury of being too narrowly focused. I prefer Expressionist painting the most because it comes from the spirit of the individual artist. Van der Velden was an early expressionist labelled a romantic and called a realist. Expressionism is a movement of the inner spirit and that is what attracts my eye.

A few thoughts on a favourite piece.

Pre 1960 McCahon's approach to landscape was influenced by van der Velden. Our 'Mountain Stream' within Van der Velden's 'Otira Gorge' series [see over] is a good example within the series. It shows an artist who got to grips with New Zealand in a different way from his colonial contemporaries.

Te Puna o Waiwhetu 2003, Jessica Crothall, acrylic on canvas, 92 x 60 cm.





From the Te Puna o Waiwhetu Collection

Mountain Stream, Otira Gorge, 1893.

Petrus van der Velden first visited the Otira region in 1891 after settling in Christchurch. He completed several large canvases of the Otira Gorge which together form an important series in the context of New Zealand art. Heavily influenced by the Hague School, his work is denoted by strong tonal contrasts and expressive technique that communicate the drama of the natural environment. Due to financial constraints ‘Mountain Stream’ was painted over an earlier painting, *The Convalescent*, which was painted in Holland. In 1898 he emigrated to Sydney, returning to Wellington in 1904. He died in Auckland in 1913. The Otira series was a high point in his painting career, and he returned to the subject while painting in Wellington.

Mountain Stream, Otira Gorge,
Petrus van der Velden, 1893,
oil on canvas,
136.2 x 194.3cm.

[Courtesy of Te Puna o Waiwhetu]

Before the Wake

Jeffrey Harpeng
after *Dead Christ* by Jessica Crothall

“I’ve never seen her look so relaxed,”
he says at the open casket.
“Yes, she certainly broke her back
for that family. Worked
her heart to the grindstone.”
“And do you think there’s
any gratitude?”
“Certainly doesn’t show. By the way
are you going round to the house after?
Hear they’ve put on quite a spread.”

Dead Christ (one of two sides), Jessica Crothall,
(5/12, *12: dialogues with time*), 2003, mirrors,
acrylic on MDF, 140 x 35 cm.



The Victims

John Weir

Bombs are through the chilly air
to target the bones of the desolate.
Effusions of flame lick at the sky.
Black ash drifts onto grey slush.
Bodies sprawl in gardens and
the wounded burn and bleed.
The war is fought each evening
between kids’ programme
and Doctor Proctor on ‘Pets.’
It smoulders in rich colour
upon millions of TV screens.
After the bombers’ dark litany
and the debauchery of the guns
there’s a full wrap-up of sports
and a squad of glittering people
chattering ever so bitchily
on ‘Entertainment Tonight.’
Bombarded, the victims
collapse in their customary chairs
glassy-eyed and twitching.